

## South and East Network of Social Sciences (SENSS) Doctoral Training Partnership

### Finding a supervisor

One of the most challenging but equally stressful tasks in applying for a PhD is securing a supervisor. An engaged, knowledgeable, and proactive supervisor can make all the difference to completing a PhD. Whilst most institutions have moved away from a model where there is a single PhD supervisor to a model that builds PhD supervision teams with different skills and attributes, the primary supervisor is still the individual that will bear most of the responsibility for navigating you (the PhD student) through your PhD project. This will also lead to a substantial contribution to knowledge and the development of key research and employability skills. It is, therefore, crucial to make the right choice and build rapport as early as possible.

The task of finding a supervisor consists of two stages:

- First, identifying the most appropriate individual and,
- Second, communicating with them and convincing them of the potential of your topic. This is the key stage for securing the interest and commitment of a supervisor.

#### **The initial search**

Some students are lucky enough to have established a relationship with a potential PhD supervisor as part of their Masters' dissertation. Writing a dissertation means that you get to work with a supervisor for a substantial period of time. If you have the opportunity to build such a working relationship and aspire to study for a PhD, make sure that you make these aspirations known to your supervisor as soon as possible. It will not only help build rapport, but also potentially shape your Masters' dissertation in a way that may lead to a PhD. Prospective PhD students often use their Masters' dissertation as an in-depth literature review or an empirical trial. (Plenty of others move in another direction, of course, so don't worry if your Masters' dissertation topic fails to grab you as a long-term direction.)

If you are moving university or want to find out more about prospective supervisors at your current institution, all universities – certainly all eight SENSS universities – have search engines enabling prospective students to search for a supervisor.

Another good starting point is Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com/>). You can conduct a thorough keyword search around your potential topic and identify experts who could be potential supervisors. Most well-established, academics have a Google scholar profile which includes their publications, research interests, and professional affiliation.

### **Communicating with a potential supervisor**

Once you have identified a potential supervisor, the most important step is to establish an open and honest communication channel with them. You could be working with them over the next three or four years and most academics have to balance conflicting demands on their time. It is, therefore, important to make your initial communication stand out from the many emails they receive. On the top of the not-to-do list is a generic email that does not address the recipient properly. Should your email appear to be a general email of speculative nature, that reads as if it is probably sent to other prospective supervisors, there is little incentive from them to respond.

Personalise your email by making sure that you start it by using the proper title and name of the potential supervisor. Make them feel that this email was written specifically for them. This will motivate them to read it. Then, once you have captured their interest, mention something interesting about yourself. How do you stand out from all other applicants? Is it your work experience, your previous studies, your access to data? This will convince them to take you seriously as a potential PhD applicant.

Follow on by discussing your research interests and, if possible, attach a draft version of your research proposal. This will demonstrate that you have done your homework and are ready to submit an application. It is always beneficial to mention how your proposal fits with their research expertise and, if possible, link it to some of their publications. This will further reinforce their view that your email was written specifically for them and not as a generic speculative email. Please do not make extravagant claims about your abilities or your preparation. If you state that you have read their publications, make sure you have actually done so.

Finally, proofread your email. Typos and grammatical mistakes put people off as they indicate lack of attention to detail and preparation.

It takes time to put this type of communication together, but it maximises the success rate of securing a PhD supervisor who is truly interested in your proposed topic and is motivated to supervise you to a successful completion.

### **The next steps**

Once you have secured an academic's agreement to supervise you, you can start preparing your application, including your proposal and your personal statement.